

Crosstown cost

Is help from the state unavoidable?

THE HEADLINE in The Oklahoman read "Age crippling much-traveled city bridge." The story detailed how concerned state transportation officials were about a nearly 2-milelong, elevated six-lane span of Interstate 40 in Oklahoma City.

"We're taking every precaution to do continuous inspections to make sure we are able to identify, at very early stages, any incipient fatigue cracks," Transportation Director Neal McCaleb said.

The story was published nine years ago. Will we still be writing about the need for Crosstown repairs in another nine years?

We certainly hope not, and current transportation boss Gary Ridley doesn't believe so. He said recently that if Congress comes through with funding this year, then the relocated I-40 Crosstown Expressway could be open by September 2008. "I have a lot of confidence in our delegation that they'll come through for us," Ridley said.

The delegation has secured \$180 million for the project, which has a price tag of twice that amount. The U.S. Senate began debate last week on a new six-year funding bill that totals \$284 billion. The House has already approved its own transportation bill for the same amount. The goal is to get something passed soon — the latest extension to the previous highway funding bill expires May 31.

It's unknown how much federal money will come Oklahoma's way, but it's safe to assume the state will not get the entire amount needed for the Crosstown project. Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Warr Acres, figures the state might get in the neighborhood of \$100 million for the Crosstown, and that may be a reach.

Istook has long pushed for the state to help pay some of the costs. Gov. Brad Henry has said he wants to see the federal long-term highway plan before committing to the idea of the state ponying up some of the needed funding. Other state officials have been loath to discuss the notion of state aid for the project.

Henry has set a Sept. 13 election for a proposal to raise the state's tax on gasoline and diesel fuel to pay for road and bridge repair. But it would be a while before any funding from that mechanism is realized — if the plan passes. The Crosstown is a pressing concern, one that isn't going away and merits discussion and planning now by state and local officials.